

Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Coping with the Ebola outbreak

The constant media coverage and health organization alerts about the spread of the Ebola virus in West Africa have naturally caused great concern, first to those living and working in those areas, but also to those living in North America, as the risk of infection has spread. People are worried about the impact this situation may have on them, their families and their country. Fear that precautions to prevent the further spread of the virus might fail are beginning to surface in the media and in our thoughts.

It is very important to learn the facts of the disease. And the facts are: when we provide very basic treatment, this disease, which has a 90% mortality rate falls to 50% and that is just with the use of Tylenol, fluids, and food. The mortality rate can go even lower than that if we were to become more comprehensive with our treatment. We have a lot of reason for hope and optimism with dealing with this disease and that's the message we want to send.

- Dr. Tim Jagatic, Doctors Without Borders, returned from caring patients exposed to Ebola in Sierra Leone

Although Senegal and Nigeria were recently declared Ebola-free, new countries, such as Mali, are now experiencing their first cases of the disease. The good news is that Ebola is not highly contagious, since it is transmitted through "direct contact with body fluids of a person who has symptoms of Ebola disease." Public health officials have confirmed that the risk remains *very low* in North America. For those coping with stress and uncertainty at this time, the first step is to understand the psychological impact this epidemic has on us, our children, and on the people around us.

What to expect

People vary in how they deal with uncertainty and stress. Some differ in how they give meaning to events or the extent to which they expect it to influence life. Others differ in how they express emotion and feel responsible for others. Despite these individual differences, it is a common human experience to be affected by threats to health and safety. During times of high stress, it is perfectly natural to feel:

- Overwhelmed / shocked
- Frightened / anxious
- Confused
- Helpless and powerless

All of these reactions may express themselves in different ways, including:

- Anxiety about travelling to and from work, as well as travelling within or outside of the country
- Anxiety in the presence of unknown persons or when in a crowd
- Difficulty concentrating and attending to tasks
- Uncharacteristic changes in sleeping and/or eating patterns
- Unusual irritation, agitation, or a heightened sense of alertness and jumpiness
- Preoccupation with the news
- Concerns relating to the safety of family members and friends
- Heightened emotions, such as increased sadness, irritability and anger
- A strong desire to be with friends and family
- A desire to implement strong rules and guidance to navigate the situation

In the workplace

Everyone reacts differently to the threat of an emerging crisis, which can affect workplace dynamics. The varied responses to the situation may cause:

- Increased inter-personal conflict

- A breakdown of co-worker communication
- Work team or group dynamics either improving or suffering – depending on the group dynamic and their individual response to the crisis situation
- Social distancing to avoid interaction and/or infection

Those who work in industries exposed to the general public, such as public transportation, customer service, or in a health care setting, may experience heightened anxiety. The World Health Organization (WHO) has put together helpful protective measures for medical staff including infection prevention and control guidance for care of patients in health-care settings. The WHO has also created a fact sheet and FAQ for those who wish to know more. For additional information on the Ebola virus disease, read the WHO's tips to keep in mind and protective measures for the general public.

Managing your stress

Given our intercultural and seamlessly global workforce, it's entirely possible to have colleagues either travelling to or returning from West Africa and other Ebola-affected regions. If you are experiencing stress or anxiety about contact with coworkers in your workplace, or how to cope with the tragedies of this outbreak, consider speaking with your manager or reaching out directly to your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) either online or by calling 1 800 387-4765. People leaders can also request a manager consultation for situations they may feel are overwhelming or confusing at this time.

It is important to realize that while we have no control over the epidemic itself, we do have control over how we manage our own reactions to the situation, and therefore how we manage our stress.

As much as possible, try to:

- Maintain family and work routines
- Eat a healthy diet and stay physically active
- Reach out to people close to you and, if possible, stay connected to family and friends abroad

- Limit your exposure to media – instead, monitor the situation through government websites, the Center for Disease Control or the World Health Organization

- Separate factual information from imagined fears
- Remember that your feelings may vary from day to day and may be different than the feelings and thoughts of those around you
- Set aside time every day for self-care and positive distraction – do something that you enjoy that brings you peace and calm, such a meditation, reading, listening to soothing music, reading to your children, or watching a funny movie
- Avoid relying on alcohol or other substances to help you cope
- Focus your attention on the things over which you have influence and control

The benefits of your Employee and Family Assistance Program

Sometimes talking to a professional counsellor can help you deal with your reactions and maintain perspective. Your EFAP is a free, totally confidential service available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

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You can reach us anytime by calling 1 800 387 4765. For on-the-go support, download My EAP app right on your mobile device.

Other resources you may find helpful at this time

- The Canadian government website on the Ebola Outbreak and Your Health
- The US Centre for Disease Control, including travel warnings
- The World Health Organization, specifically on Ebola updates

The medical information provided is of a general nature and should not substitute the advice of a medical professional. If you feel you are experiencing a medical emergency, contact a medical professional immediately.

1.844.880.9137.